

# Ethiopia's New Prime Minister Visits the United States to "Build Bridges"

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Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, arrived in the United States on July 26 for a three-city tour, with stops in Washington, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis. It is his first U.S. trip since being elected by parliament on April 2, and the visit is focused on engaging the Ethiopian diaspora, who represent the [second largest African diaspora population](#) in the United States. Prime Minister Abiy's early outreach to Ethiopian-Americans is noteworthy, given [outspoken criticism](#) from some regarding governance under the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which has been in power since 1991. Many Ethiopian-Americans have [agitated](#) for greater U.S. support for human rights and inclusive governance in Ethiopia, including through legislation such as H.Res. 128, which the House of Representatives adopted in April, and S.Res. 168.

At 41, Abiy is Africa's youngest head of state, leading the continent's fastest growing economy and second most populous country, home to over 100 million people. He is also the new head of the EPRDF, a coalition of ethnically based parties that has ruled Ethiopia since EPRDF rebels overthrew a Marxist junta in 1991. His predecessor Hailemariam Desalegn resigned in early 2018, declaring it necessary to pave the way for reforms that would "[lead to sustainable peace and democracy](#)." Under Hailemariam's rule, Ethiopia was rocked by [anti-government protests](#) and a security force crackdown in which hundreds were killed and more than [26,000 detained](#). A government-imposed state of emergency muted the demonstrations but failed to calm tensions, and some observers warned that Ethiopia [risked state collapse](#).

The heartland of the protest movement was Abiy's home region of Oromia, which surrounds the capital and is home to Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo. Their perceived marginalization by political elites has been a long-standing grievance. Many EPRDF critics have viewed the government as dominated by the minority ethnic group of Ethiopia's leader for two decades, [Meles Zenawi](#), who died in 2012. The question now is whether Abiy can change that perception and address growing [strains on the country's model of ethnic federalism](#).

The theme of Abiy's U.S. visit, "Break the wall, build bridges," is emblematic of his approach since taking office. He has attracted [international headlines](#) and optimism with fast-paced announcements of reforms and outreach to opponents, most notably to the leader of Ethiopia's neighbor and longtime adversary, Eritrea, but also to opposition leaders. While in the United States, he [reconciled](#) the two factions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which split when the EPRDF took power. Abiy has

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acknowledged critiques of EPRDF governance and “the need to address existing inequities that led to recent unrest,” declaring that “democracy cannot be realized in the absence of rights.” The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights described “tremendous hope, but also anxiety” among Ethiopians on a recent visit, as well as “expectations of meaningful accountability” for serious human rights abuses.

Under Abiy’s leadership, the government has released thousands of political prisoners, lifted the state of emergency, removed terrorist designations on opposition groups, closed a notorious detention facility, and granted amnesty to jailed dissidents. He has replaced top security chiefs, fired prison officials, and begun a process to amend some of the country’s most repressive laws. Abiy has acknowledged calls for electoral reforms and declared that Ethiopia has “no option” but to pursue “multiparty democracy supported by strong institutions that respect human rights and rule of law.” He has pledged to reform the largely state-controlled economy, opening new sectors to foreign investment.

Prime Minister Abiy’s outreach to Eritrea could bring greater stability to the broader region. Abiy, who was a military intelligence officer during the Ethiopia-Eritrea border war (1998-2000) in which over 80,000 people died, announced in June that Ethiopia would implement a peace deal signed in 2000 to end a military stalemate that has endured for almost two decades. On July 9, the two governments declared the war over and heralded “a new era of peace and friendship.” They have taken steps to restore ties, resuming flights and reopening embassies and phone lines, reconnecting families divided by the war.

Building trade ties could be transformative: landlocked Ethiopia currently relies on tiny Djibouti for access to the Red Sea, and links to Ethiopia’s fast-growing economy could have a dramatic impact on Eritrea, particularly if it ends its practice of indefinite national service, which constrains Eritreans’ ability to meet their families’ basic needs and fuels migration. The UN Secretary-General suggests that peace could render “obsolete” the conditions under which UN sanctions on Eritrea were imposed. Ethiopia’s support, as a member of the UN Security Council, would be critical, particularly if Ethiopia could facilitate an end to Eritrea’s border dispute with Djibouti. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been an important player in Ethiopia and Eritrea’s rapprochement—it has taken an increasingly assertive role in the Horn of Africa in recent years, securing new port deals and establishing a military base in Eritrea for operations in Yemen. In June, the UAE pledged \$3 billion in support to Ethiopia, to address a severe foreign exchange shortage and expand investments in the country.

While Abiy’s early overtures have earned praise, support for him is not universal. In June, a grenade attack marred his first public speech in the capital. The government blamed “anti-peace elements;” some Ethiopians do not support Abiy’s concessions on the Eritrea border dispute. He faces likely headwinds from EPRDF hardliners. Some critics contend Abiy is not doing enough to curb intercommunal violence: more than 2.6 million Ethiopians are currently displaced, most uprooted by conflict in the past year. Human rights activists have responded to Abiy with cautious optimism, but urge further actions to end human rights abuses in Ethiopia’s prisons, bolster independent institutions, and implement various political reforms ahead of elections in 2020.

U.S. officials have welcomed the prime minister’s efforts and promised support for reform and peace initiatives, with possible foreign aid implications. U.S. assistance to Ethiopia regularly totals over \$1 billion annually, to address chronic food insecurity, boost health indicators and economic growth, and support regional peace and security contributions. For more background, see CRS In Focus IF10185, *Ethiopia*.

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